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Few books begin quite as emphatically as the Bible, and few canonic texts start and end with the inconclusiveness of the Talmud, where the "final word is left unsaid." All writers and readers know that beginnings and endings are significant and that these markers become determinative. In this issue of *Sh'ma* we've invited scholars and other writers to think about how various classical Jewish texts as well as some of their own work begins and concludes, and how they get from one point to the next. We open with Charlotte Fonrobert musing on how she lives within the seemingly odd meanderings of the Talmud; elsewhere Norman Cohen reflects on the Bible's ending and how different Judaism might have been had the Bible ended with Joshua; Jane Kanarek looks at *siyyum*, the ritual of ending the study of a talmudic tractate. David Nimmer reflects on copyright protection; Adam Kirsch on saying something new about Disraeli; and two essays address the critical role commentary plays in writing and interpretation. Other writers explore similar questions in the context of other forms of cultural creation — how visual arts and contemporary expression serve as ways of engaging Jewish text. —SB

It Is Not for Me to Finish the Text, Yet Neither Am I Free to Desist

Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert

I remember my first encounter with the Babylonian Talmud (BT) as a seminary student. It was during my second semester studying at a Protestant seminary in Berlin, with one semester of biblical Hebrew under my belt. A doctoral student taught a course on *pereq heleq*, the eleventh chapter of Tractate Sanhedrin that bundles the plenitude of messianic speculations and ideas of the rabbinic cross-generational and transgeographic collective into one long exposition. The didactic purpose of that course had been to explore the Jewish messianic expectations that supposedly produced Jesus of Nazareth, son of David, the anointed one.

At that time, I approached the talmudic text as a believer, as someone searching not just for historical knowledge, or merely out of crosscultural curiosity, but as someone who wanted to understand how the tradition I had grown up with (German Congregational Protestantism) could come to believe that this man from the hinterland region of the Galilee was the messiah, and even the son of God. Somewhere in those texts there had to be a secret that waited to be unlocked.

To this day, I am grappling with understanding the magic attraction that the talmudic text exerted on me in that first encounter. I have long since given up on the Christian myth, but my love of the talmudic text and, to a certain degree, even my naïve passion as a believer remain. And as with any magic — which is to say irrational or transrational attraction — it cannot be grasped in its totality lest it lose its hold.

But surely one aspect would be this: the willingness of the text to remain incomplete, to forsake authority, to leave the final word unsaid; and the insistence of the text that no one, neither Rabbi Akiva, nor Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nassi, nor Rav Ashi, and certainly no one of us — so many centuries later — will have the final word. And none of them, certainly not in *pereq heleq*, was granted the aspiration to or satisfaction of a magnum opus that says it all, not a *City of God*, no "life," or "confession." The truth does not abide with someone, with any one person; it is born from the principled discussion between two or more people. It is born from keeping the discussion going, restaging it. And this intuitive perception of the talmudic rhetoric, I experience as profoundly liberating. The Talmud gave me disagreement, dispute, and conversation where early Christian theologians gave me dogmatic claims to the truth.

Somewhere in that long eleventh chapter of Tractate Sanhedrin, the talmudic text records (or constructs) the following dispute about redemption between Rav and Shmuel, the earliest Babylonian inheritors (or promoters) of the Mishnah; one is from Sura, the other from Nehardea.

Rav said: All the predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Samuel maintained: it is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning. —BT Sanhedrin 97b

Here are two statements that express diametrically opposed views of the way of the world. Freely translating the language of redemption, *ge'ulah*, the Talmud remains committed to: either it matters what we do (repentance and good deeds), or it does not matter what we do (redemption will come about by itself, without human effort). In my first encounter with this passage, as a good Protestant seminary student, this dispute resonated deeply although not yet clearly, and I could easily read it as being born from profound theological sensibilities, potentially irreconcilable ones as we shall see in a minute.

But first this: the talmudic text, instead of lending authority to either Rav or Shmuel, proceeds to throw its weight behind the legitimacy of the disagreement itself, by underwriting it with an earlier, potentially more authoritative dispute, of which we will cite only a part.

A tradition from the time of the Mishnah taught:

Rabbi Eliezer said: "If Israel repent, they will be redeemed, as it is written, 'Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings' (Jeremiah 3:22)." R. Joshua said to him: "But is it not written, 'you have sold yourselves for nothing; and you shall be redeemed without money'? (Isaiah 52:3)." Meaning, you have sold yourselves for nothing, for idolatry; and you shall be redeemed without money — without repentance and good deeds.

The Talmud offers as proof an earlier tradition in which two sages again dispute whether human effort (as in repentance) will make a difference. For one (Rabbi Eliezer) it absolutely does: redemption is linked to repentance — the state of the world to human behavior — and he cites the biblical verse to prove it: God responds to human action rather than following God's own design. For the other (Rabbi Yehoshua) it does not: redemption *will* come about but it will come about regardless of human behavior. He also has the biblical verse to back up his position. The citation of biblical verses adds another dynamic to the dispute: not only do the sages themselves differ, but so does the Tanakh, or at least the biblical prophets, as to the significance of human action. Therein is the dispute anchored. Subsequently, the dispute evolves as a contest over biblical verses, with both sages volleying individual verses:

Rabbi Eliezer retorted to Rabbi Joshua: "But is it not written, 'Return unto me, and I will return unto you' (Malachi 3:7)"? Rabbi Joshua rejoined: "But is it not written, 'For I am master over you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion' (Jeremiah 3:14)"? Rabbi Eliezer replied: "But it is written, 'in returning and rest shall ye be saved' (Isaiah 30:15)"! Rabbi Joshua replied: "But is it not written, 'Thus says the Lord, The Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despises, to him whom the nations abhor, to a servant of rulers: Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship' (Isaiah 49:7)"? Rabbi Eliezer countered: "But is it not written, 'if thou wilt return, O Israel, says the Lord, return unto me' (Jeremiah 4:1)"? Rabbi Joshua answered, "But it is elsewhere written, 'And I heard the man clothed in linen, which was upon the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and swore by him that lives forever that it shall be for a time, two times and a half, and when he shall have accomplished to scatter the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished' (Daniel 12:7)." At this, Rabbi Eliezer remained silent.

This, then, is where we have been led: we enter the fundamental dispute through the conversation between the later Babylonian sages (Rav and Shmuel); and we are guided to the earlier dispute between the Galilean sages Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer who negotiate the message of the prophetic literature in the dispute. The dispute appears as one that is multilayered text- and chronology-wise, and it appears open-ended in a circular way, since even though Rabbi Eliezer, our proponent of the importance of ethics, loses in the contest over biblical verses, the later Babylonian sages continue to disagree. The text turns us and turns us again, as we seek to find everything within it.

Emerging from this guided path through the never ending yet principled dispute, a resonance emerges more clearly. The debate be-

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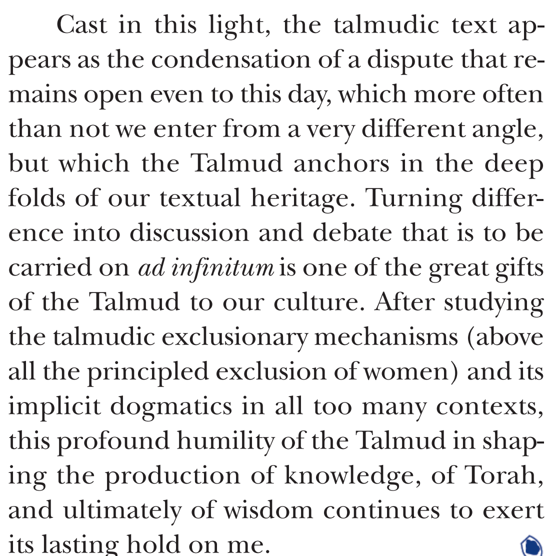
tween our two positions on the question of redemption starts to appear as one between Judaism and Christianity *in toto*. Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer echo Paul's dyad of faith versus works. Is it "faith" and faith alone — in Rabbi Joshua's terms above, "you shall be redeemed without (good) works" — that will bring about one's salvation (to use the term more familiar in Christian rhetoric)? Or, is it works, in this context, repentance? Rabbi Joshua appears in disguise as Paul, who argues vigorously and radically on behalf of faith, while Rabbi Eliezer upholds one of the deepest sensibilities underlying rabbinic Judaism (and to a certain degree, of course, the Torah), namely, the belief in the ultimate significance of good deeds and the moral fabric of the universe.



Cast in this light, the talmudic text appears as the condensation of a dispute that remains open even to this day, which more often than not we enter from a very different angle, but which the Talmud anchors in the deep folds of our textual heritage. Turning difference into discussion and debate that is to be carried on *ad infinitum* is one of the great gifts of the Talmud to our culture. After studying the talmudic exclusionary mechanisms (above all the principled exclusion of women) and its implicit dogmatics in all too many contexts, this profound humility of the Talmud in shaping the production of knowledge, of Torah, and ultimately of wisdom continues to exert its lasting hold on me.

Lying Down Between the Letters in the Middle of a Text

David Nimmer

As co-author of a forthcoming book addressing copyright protection of rabbinic responsa dated 1551–1999, I have been intensively studying a case from the 1820s about the publication of the Roedelheim *machzor*. Wolf Heidenheim published it in 1800, and Anton Schmid, a Christian publisher of Hebrew books, pirated the *machzor* shortly thereafter. The matter reached two famous rabbis who issued contradictory responsa: The Chatam Sofer was of the opinion that copyright infringement existed; the chief rabbi of Moravia, Mordechai Banet, took the contrary point of view.

The elaborate talmudic reasoning employed by both rabbis forced me to write some 80 pages to ventilate their dispute. Then further scrutiny and a query from a friend about a few words, offered entirely new insights into the depth of our tradition.

A personal letter from R' Banet to the Chatam Sofer in 1823 cites Numbers 23:23, in which Bilaam announces (against his will) that divination (*nachash*) is foreign to the Jewish people. What does it all have to do with copyright protection for the Roedelheim *machzor*?

* * *

First, a bit of background about approbations in Hebrew publications. Today, famous people write forewords to books, and the publisher includes a copyright notice. In centuries past, *haskama* and *cherem* served those functions. A famous rabbi would write a *haskama* (approbation) to validate the doctrinal bona fides of the author in question. That *haskama* might contain a *cherem* (ban), ordering the world at large not to republish the work within a set term, say 25 years. *Cherem* is merely one type of rabbinic order of excommunication. Others are *nidui* and *shamta*, but those differences are not relevant here.

The word *nachash* in Hebrew has two distinct meanings. One is "*divination,*" as we just saw. Entirely separate is "*snake*," familiar to us as the entity that tempted Eve and also appears in many other settings.

To understand R' Banet's words in 1823, we must go back to a responsum authored by Yosef al-Ashkar, who was forced to flee Spain in 1492. He explicated the word "*nachash*" as it refers to a snake. In particular, he stated that a person should be:

> *careful not to depart from the sages' words, either to the left or the right, the reason being that their bite is like the bite of a snake. For just as a snake kills with its bite, so the sages punish those who break down their fence. As Solomon wrote, "Whoever digs a pit may fall into it, and whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake" [Ecclesiastes 10:8], and the word* ***NaCHaSH*** *is an acronym for* ***N****idui,* ***CH****erem, and* ***SH****amta.*

This responsum uses the word "*NaCHaSH*" as an acronym for the three types

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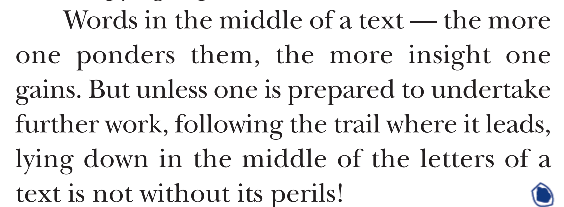
of rabbinical bans, and therefore as a superset of *cherem*. That reference actually became a common motif; decisors from medieval through modern times used the word *nachash* to refer to a *cherem*, all of them habitually referencing the wisdom of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 10:8.

We can now tackle our mystery. When R' Banet stated that "there is no *nachash* in Jacob," (Numbers 23:23) he was playing off the common trope that "*nachash*" refers to "*cherem*." Yet, in doing so, he pulled a series of reversals.

Instead of quoting the standard verse from Ecclesiastes, he adduced a verse that was an outlier from Numbers. The result strikes the reader as ironic, as the lesson no longer comes from the wisest man ever to walk the earth, namely the virtuous Solomon, but instead from the wicked Gentile prophet, Bilaam (albeit here speaking against his will with divine support).

Concomitantly, instead of a quoting a verse referring to a *nachash* of the reptilian variety, his selection of a verse from Numbers left him with a usage containing a meaning from the lexicon of sorcery. Again, the effect strikes the reader as ironic, as it is no longer possible to invoke the metaphorical snakebite of the sages through their *cherem* (one would, instead, have to accuse the sages of prohibited sorcery should they dare to invoke a *cherem*).

Instead of adopting the usual approval of the *nachash* as a heavenly agent, he adopts a denunciation of *nachash*.



Instead of following the traditional formulation to vest in rabbinic bans supreme power, such that those who dare violate them receive death by snakebite, he attacks the institution of bans, emptying the publishing *cherem* of much of its force (a stance that drew fire from the Chatam Sofer, who wished to uphold copyright protection).

Words in the middle of a text — the more one ponders them, the more insight one gains. But unless one is prepared to undertake further work, following the trail where it leads, lying down in the middle of the letters of a text is not without its perils!

Translator, Commentator, Writer

Michael Carasik

Lots of people who don't know Spanish have read *Don Quixote*; lots of people who don't know Russian have read *Anna Karenina*. How did they do it?

The answer, of course, is that they didn't. What they read was a book written by Edith Grossman or, *l'havdil*, Constance Garnett. But nobody ever talks about having read the new novel by Edith Grossman. Translators who stand in between the novelists and their English-speaking readers have, quite successfully, managed to disappear. You are reading a novel about Russians but, amazingly, all of the characters are speaking English.

Synagogues are full of Jews who argue about what "the Torah" is saying when they are really arguing with Rabbi Hertz, or some other translator/commentator. For the majority of us, "the Torah" is not what's written in the scroll but whatever English translation happens to be available at our seats. We rarely ask whether we can trust the translators; mostly we forget about them.

As the creator, translator, and editor of *The Commentators' Bible* series, I try to hide in plain sight. As a translator, I am not merely standing between Torah and its English-speaking readers; I'm also standing between those readers and the eleven commentators who are trying to be only slightly less transparent.

The commentator's personality will determine his relationship to the text. Some commentators would like nothing better than to stand one step in back of the readers, gently guiding them with a hand on the back when the path through the text before them is not clear. Others hold up a large flag and a bullhorn, through which they can shout, "Follow me!" No offense to him, but Abraham Ibn Ezra strikes me as being this kind of commentator. He is the star of his own commentary. He will indulge in long explanations about astronomy (Leviticus 25:30) or explain with glee how he completely stymied a "Sadducee" (that is, a Karaite) who spent a month arguing with him about a point of tradition that the sages had long ago settled (Leviticus 7:20 in Hebrew editions, 7:23 and 7:26 in my edition).

At the other extreme, Rashi displays a much milder persona. My presumption is that this reflects his real personality, just as Ibn Ezra's excitability reflects his. When Ibn Ezra intrudes between the reader and the Torah,

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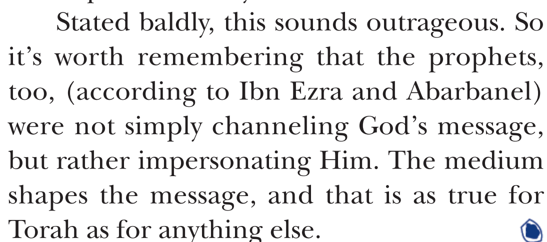
his voice is obvious. But Rashi's quiet presence has spoken much louder over the centuries than Ibn Ezra's noise.

The commentators in *The Commentators' Bible* wrote in Hebrew about a Hebrew text; I had to insinuate myself in such a way that the commentator could write in English about a text his readers would primarily encounter in English translation.

With regard to the Torah itself, the way to make the translation vanish was, paradoxically, to make it more visible. This I did by including two English translations, rather than one, and by having the commentators criticize one or both translations when necessary. This forces readers to be aware that it's the Hebrew text that is Torah, not the English. (Visit shma.com for an example.)

Standing in between the readers and the commentators is trickier. It involves a certain amount of mimicry and quite a lot of *chutzpah*. As the English-language literary agent of Nahmanides, I have often had to tell him, "Interesting! But the readers I'm introducing to you aren't ready to learn that." The commentators in *The Commentators' Bible*, therefore, are not the commentators themselves — they are being impersonated by me, just as Cervantes was impersonated by Edith Grossman.

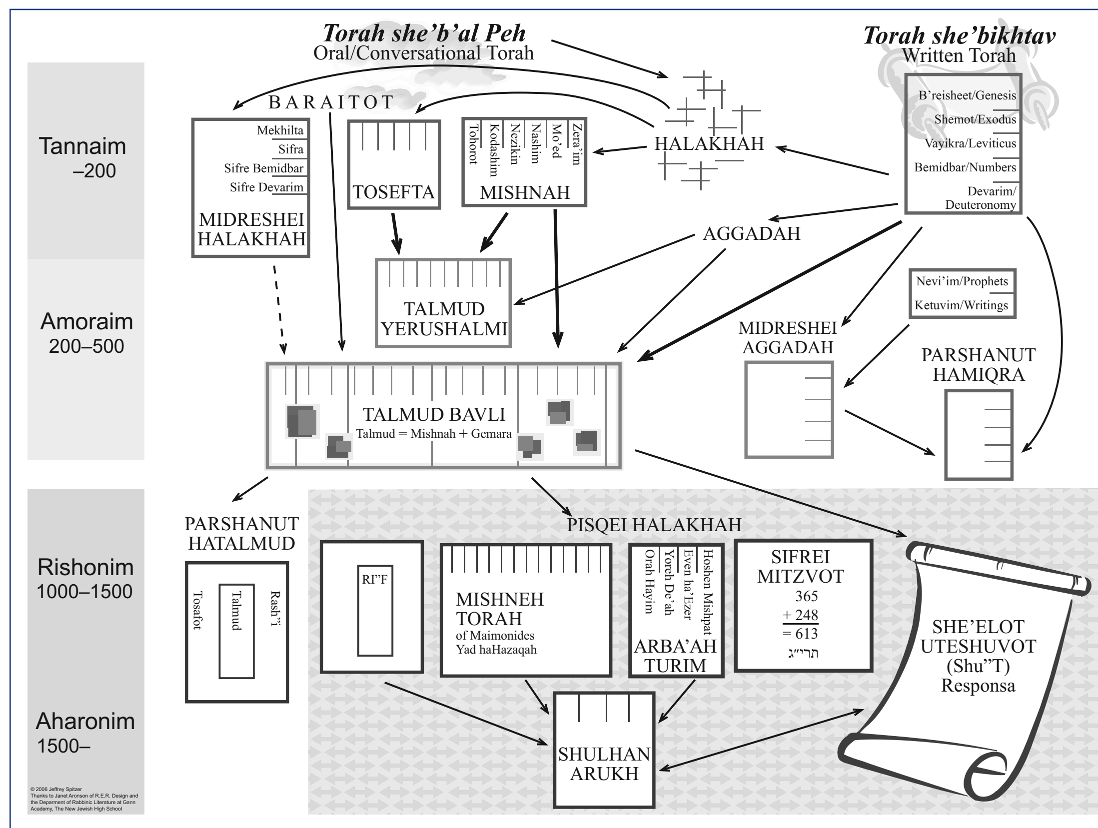
Stated baldly, this sounds outrageous. So it's worth remembering that the prophets, too, (according to Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel) were not simply channeling God's message, but rather impersonating Him. The medium shapes the message, and that is as true for Torah as for anything else.



Rabbinic Literature:
An Electronic Genre Map

The Rabbinic Literature Genre Map is a graphical way of describing the major documents of the rabbinic library, their structures, their literary relationships, and their (rough) periodization. The Web-based English and Hebrew versions provide more detail along with links to additional online resources. Produced by Jeffrey Spitzer, chair of Rabbinics at Gann Academy: The New Jewish High School in Waltham, MA, the genre map is one tool in an ongoing effort to expose students to the breadth of rabbinic literature.

https://fc.gannacademy.org/gannopedia/genremap/rlgenremap.html



On Being a Marginally Jewish Reader

Ken Gordon

Fran Lebowitz once wrote that "[t]he opposite of talking isn't listening: it's waiting," and often, too often, this is the attitude of certain ambitious readers, people who go hurtling through a book with a pen in hand and a chip on their shoulder. I'm thinking of those people who read with their ego, aiming to prove themselves superior to the volume in hand. This approach makes it impossible to do good reading, the sort of reading that critic George Steiner prescribes when he writes, "The authentic experience of understanding, when we are spoken to by another human being or poem, is one of responding responsibly." Responding well means shutting down the self and putting the focus on the voice that's speaking.

How do I know about this? For a long time I led with my ego. The absurdly serious reader I used to be didn't know how to shut himself down, and he made a performance out of writing in the margins of books. He loved to yammer on about how the only good readers are critical readers and how criticism is borne from skepticism, which he would have equated with a willingness to deface an author's text. His pen was continually en garde for lines and sentences and paragraphs that proved or disproved some concept (usually one that was suggested in a graduate-school class and seconded by the required reading) — something as wonderfully interesting as, say, a phrase that illustrated the difference between "signifier" and "signified."

But there was one reading technique from those unhappy academic days that doesn't seem repulsively pretentious and silly now: after scribbling all over a text, I would export selected sentences from whatever book or poem or essay I was reading — not always knowing why I found them intriguing — and then type them into my boxy word processor. I would line up my single-spaced quotes one after the other and then, below each quotation, try to explain to myself why I had dug up each gem. Eventually, my interpretations would form some kind of coherence, and from there it was just a few thousand revisions to an actual paper.

While this method taught me how to analyze my own literary thoughts, it's a pretty lousy way to read literature. The most respectful thing one can do to a written work of art is to imagine it — to cast and direct its words into the screening room of one's head. You need to make yourself, as Joseph Conrad suggested, see.

When we sit down to focus on a book, our eyes and our minds naturally wander — and wander they should. Remember when Nathan Zuckerman learns about the difficulties of reading from the short story writer I. L. Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*? I think his experience is fairly common, if not instructive:

"My mind strays… At the end of the page I try to summarize to myself what I've read and my mind is a blank — I've been sitting in my chair doing nothing. Of course, I have always read books with pen in hand, but now I find that if I don't, even while reading a magazine, my attention is not on what's in front of me."

Lonoff is right: paying attention is tough! There's a lot going on inside and outside of us all the time, and when we recognize this, we see that books make only a slim volume when shelved next to Life. Think enough about this and you start thinking some deeply subversive thoughts like: Why spend your time tucked into a chair aiming your consciousness at a work of literature when you could be loving your warm wife in the next room, or going for a run in the cool of a June morning? You remember that a book is a paltry thing compared to what Philip Larkin calls "the million-petalled flower/Of being here." But, on the other hand, books are essential.

The text running through the center of this page is an edited excerpt of an earlier, very long essay I wrote a called "The Underlining Principle." The comments on either side are, generally speaking, an attempt to apply a talmudic approach to my own work. As a secular reader, the religious tradition I most respond to is the talmudic concept of marginal commentary — though I speak, admittedly, out of a relative ignorance here. Virtually all of my information on the topic comes from Jonathan Rosen's *The Talmud and the Internet* and a bizarre Talmud-style novel by Benjamin Zucker called *Blue*.

Steiner, in his autobiography, talks about his multilingual childhood education (it included Shakespeare and Greek and Latin tutorials), all of which was authorized by his non-religious father, "Consciously or not, the skeptical ironist had set out for his son a secular Talmud."

I think back to junior year abroad at the University of Sheffield. For help with a paper, lecturer Tim Armstrong, an academic constantly in tweed, lent me his copy Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*. It was, to me, a revolution. A revelation. The little lecturer had taken it upon himself not merely the task of underlining but of adding glosses — complete, intelligent, sometimes argumentative sentences — to Kermode's text. Hell, he appended his own prefatory quote to the flyleaf, something from Sylvia Plath (which seemed to me somewhere between embarrassingly pretentious and enviably audacious). From now on, I concluded, I would write literate, allusive sentences in a neat, serious handwriting that would show to whomever picked up the book next what a learned dude I was. I would write in real books the way professors wrote on my papers — treat a book the way my critical, witty, sometimes condescending professors treated my own work.

I've just been looking over the comments I made on a book called *The Ethics of Reading* by J. Hillis Miller. Well, looking. I tried to look at it, but the radioactive pretension of those marginal remarks made it virtually impossible to stare at the slim volume for more than a few seconds at a time.

Missed out on Saussurian linguistics? Mazel tov. I mean, don't worry. The infamously Jew-averse T. S. Eliot phrases the whole signifier/signified split very nicely here:
"Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow."

The scene of the examination is important. To write on a page of one's own shows some kind of restraint. It seems, also, to smack less of performance than the on-the-page commentary.

I recognize that the visual imperative goes against the famed biblical prohibition against graven images… but if one's going to read seriously, one needs to develop that sense.

I wonder what it means that there isn't a single mark in any of the Philip Roth books on my shelf — and I own most of the Great Man's volumes.

I'd make the case for treating reading as seriously as human interaction. If we were to employ Martin Buber's famed I-Thou approach to reading and truly engage the page, we'd be moving toward a more responsible way of life.

Ken Gordon is the editor of JBooks.com, the founder of QuickMuse.com, and a freelance writer.

In the opening pages of the *Zohar* there is a fascinating discussion of the ancient Hebrew term *Elohim*, the most common name for God in the Hebrew Bible. Noticing the plural form of this name (*El* being the singular form), the mystics deconstruct this term, reading it as two separate words: *Mi* and *Eleh*, "Who" and "These." This wordplay reminds us of the precarious nature of theology. On the one hand, all we can say about God is *Mi* — Who are you, and what do you want of us? On the other hand, the *Zohar* authors encourage us to engage imaginatively in God-talk — *Eleh* (these) are the ways in which I experience the Divine, and it is based on these experiences that I wish to shape my life.

This dual message of theological humility and creativity remains as relevant today as it was for the medieval sages who articulated it centuries ago. It challenges us to take our spiritual lives seriously, while warning us of the dangers of becoming overly dogmatic.

—Or Rose

When Moses asks God to reveal a name to tell the people who will lead them out of Egypt, God responds, *Ehyeh*, "I shall be." Arthur Green writes: "*Ehyeh* is God as future, the One of utter openness to all that is to be." So begins Theological Modesty.

If we pay close attention to our own experience, it reveals one thing: change. We are on a planet moving at the rate of 1000 miles per hour around the sun. Our cells completely change every seven years. Light and sound are pulsing vibrations that never reach stasis. If we pause and sit quietly we will experience the life force manifesting in the inhale followed by the exhale. We are alive because motion is inside of us. We can feel the pulses, in our belly, the soles of our feet, the palms of our hands, the center of our foreheads. Life itself is in motion, in rhythm. Can God be fixed? Can our concepts of God be limited?

As we sit observing our minds, we see how our thoughts arise, change, and pass. Theological modesty is a stance of awe. It respects the emergent wisdom we are and in which we live. It is interested in questions like this one: how do we connect to ourselves, each other, and the planet in a way that eases suffering and promotes health, wellbeing, and love? Why does there have to be a limit on the variety of answers to this question?

—Sheila Peltz Weinberg

"... if one's concept of God today is exactly as it was yesterday, it is tantamount to worshipping idols."

Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859)

Revelation at Mount Sinai as a defining moment for the Jewish people is not limited to a specific historic moment; rather, it is intended to be a daily active new experience/reexperience. (*Sifri*; Rashi Deuteronomy11:13) The Lubavitcher Rebbe noted that just as the chosen mountain was located in a desert, which has no owner, so too no person or group has ownership of revelation; every Jew has an equal claim to Torah.

"Theological Modesty" is a concept based on three premises that have their roots within Jewish tradition. Let's make this serve as the backdrop for deeper — broader and wider — Jewish dialogue. "Theological Modesty" reestablishes God, and not ourselves, at the center of our lives; it understands the limitations we have as human beings; it recognizes the dangers inherent in the dogmatic certainty that *our* personal beliefs are the only ones possibly reflective of God's truth.

We are challenged daily to experience revelation anew. It is not enough to ask *ourselves* new questions each day and listen only to *our own* answers. We are commanded *Sh'ma Yisrael!*

—William Liss-Levinson

There is one major inference to be drawn from both the Kotzker and Liss-Levinson's commentary: if we take faith seriously, we must risk our certainties. Religious posing is rock-solid, but genuine faith is flexible, open, and inclusive of doubt. Hearing the word "holy," some young children mistake it to mean "full of holes" — which is not so far from the truth. In order to pray, to engage in dialogue, or simply to listen, we must be permeable.

Maimonides named five offenses that "close the way to repentance to those who commit them: (1) separating from the community…; (2) opposing the dicta of the sages…; (3) mocking the mitzvot…; (4) disdaining one's teachers…; (5) and hating rebukes…." (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 4:2) God offers specific reasons why each sin is so difficult to return from, but they all have this in common: closing oneself off. When we refuse to be influenced, we refuse innovation — and even revelation itself.

—Debra Orenstein

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שמע Sh'ma

Writing His Way into History

Adam Kirsch

A few years ago, when I first began to think about writing a book about Benjamin Disraeli, I knew only the outlines of his life — that he was the only Jewish prime minister of England, and that he was a novelist as well as a professional politician. The combination of novelist and politician was already intriguing to me: as a poet and literary critic, I was interested to see how Disraeli combined the very different personality types of the man of letters and the man of action. It was not until I plunged into his own books, however, that I came to realize that the bridge between those two identities was nothing other than Disraeli's Jewishness. Being a Jew, being a writer, and being a leader were, for Disraeli, three ways of responding to his deepest passion — to impress his personality on history.

The best place to see this connection at work is in his most personal novel, *Contarini Fleming*, which he wrote in 1832 when he was 27 years old. In many ways, it is a fairly conventional example of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of education that was a favorite genre among the Romantics. Like so many young writers before and since, Disraeli modeled his hero on himself, and told the story of his dawning recognition that he possessed extraordinary powers. The reader follows Contarini as he falls precociously in love, feels the rapture of inspiration, and travels to exotic cities.

But one feature of Disraeli's novel is unique and helps to explain why I found Disraeli so fascinating to write and think about. Unlike almost any other young poet in fiction, Contarini Fleming is constantly being seduced away from poetry by political ambition. In an earlier era of British history, it was not uncommon for the same man to seek fame in literature and in politics: think of Milton, who threw himself into the English Civil War before writing *Paradise Lost*, or Joseph Addison, an accomplished essayist and adept Parliamentarian. But in the 1830s, when Disraeli was starting his career, the Romantic era in English literature was in full swing, and nothing could be more foreign to the Romantic spirit than the idea of combining sublime poetry with workaday politics. Byron, who was the young Disraeli's idol, might enlist in the Greek War of Independence, but you could hardly imagine him going every day to the House of Lords, shepherding bills through committee, and intriguing for party leadership.

Yet Disraeli takes care to provide his hero with a professional politician for a father, thus allowing Contarini to experience practical politics at an early age. The key scene in the novel comes when the elder Fleming lectures Contarini on the inferiority of poetry to power:

> *"What were all those great poets of whom we now talk so much, what were they in their lifetime? The most miserable of their species. Depressed, doubtful, obscure, or involved in petty quarrels and petty persecutions; often unappreciated, utterly uninfluential, beggars, flatterers of men unworthy even of their recognition; what a train of disgustful incidents, what a record of degrading circumstances, is the life of a great poet! A man of great energies aspires that they should be felt in his lifetime, that his existence should be rendered more intensely vital by the constant consciousness of his multiplied and multiplying power. Is posthumous fame a substitute for all this?…Would you rather have been Homer or Julius Caesar, Shakespeare or Napoleon? No one doubts."*

Why does Disraeli betray the Romantic script in this way, placing the world above the soul, achievement above imagination? The reason is suggested by the other unique element in *Contarini Fleming*: Contarini's veiled but still identifiable Jewishness. Disraeli does not come right out and say that his alter ego is Jewish; as his first name suggests, he is meant to be half Italian. But we are obviously listening to Disraeli's own experience growing up as a Jew in England when the young Contarini, who lives in Scandinavia, complains about his Nordic half-brothers: "They were called my brothers, but Nature gave the lie to the reiterated assertion. There was no similitude between us. Their blue eyes, their flaxen hair, and their white visages claimed no kindred with my Venetian countenance. Wherever I moved I looked around me, and beheld a race different from myself."

Here is another standard trope of Romantic literature, the myth of the ugly duckling. (Disraeli and Hans Christian Andersen were, in fact, almost exact contemporaries.)

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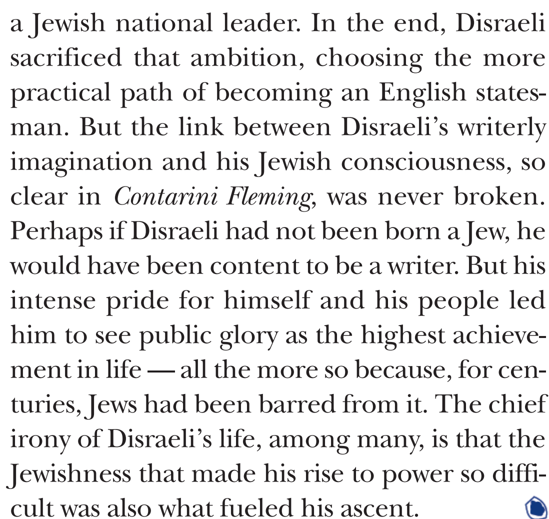

But as the novel progresses, Contarini's "Venetian" heritage intersects with his political ambitions in a remarkable way. He happens to read a history of Venice in which he learns that the Contarinis, his mother's family, were a race of great noblemen, and he travels to the city to see its ancient grandeur. At the time Disraeli wrote, Venice was under Austrian occupation, but Contarini dreams of devoting his life to restoring its independence, thus vindicating his ancestry and turning his lifelong difference into a source of pride.

It is an allegory of Zionism, with Venice standing in for Palestine, and it offers a glimpse of Disraeli's own youthful dreams of becoming a Jewish national leader. In the end, Disraeli sacrificed that ambition, choosing the more practical path of becoming an English statesman. But the link between Disraeli's writerly imagination and his Jewish consciousness, so clear in *Contarini Fleming*, was never broken. Perhaps if Disraeli had not been born a Jew, he would have been content to be a writer. But his intense pride for himself and his people led him to see public glory as the highest achievement in life — all the more so because, for centuries, Jews had been barred from it. The chief irony of Disraeli's life, among many, is that the Jewishness that made his rise to power so difficult was also what fueled his ascent.

Choosing an Ending to the Torah:

Moses' Death, or Entrance into the Land of Israel

Norman Cohen

The sojourn from Egypt to the Promised Land is both the main trope of Jewish life and the metaphor for our individual lives. The promise of the land of Israel to the Jewish people is the hallmark of God's covenant throughout the Bible. So why, then, does the Torah end with the death of Moses rather than the culmination of the Israelites' journey out of slavery and into the land? Furthermore, why leave the people at the end of Deuteronomy bereft of their leader Moses, fragile and lacking confidence as they prepare to enter Canaan to do battle with "giants"? (In Numbers 13:33, the spies described the inhabitants of Canaan as *anakim*, giants, and the Israelites were like grasshoppers in comparison).

With Moses' death, they could feel that God was no longer in their midst, since they had come to identify the Divine presence with Moses. (Deut. 31:17) In addition, the note upon which Deuteronomy ends — in contrast to the uplifting end of the Israelites' journey into their Promised Land — is the recalling of the plagues wrought upon the Pharaoh and Egypt, and Moses' power and might. (Deut. 34:11-12)

Some biblical scholars think that the death of Moses originally belonged to the end of the Book of Numbers. We read in Numbers 27:12ff (which is similar to the end of Deuteronomy) that the Israelites are camped in the plains of Moab, opposite Jericho, and Moses is told to ascend and view the land given to the people of Israel that he will not enter because of his impending death. This passage probably concluded the "Tetrateuch" (the four books, Genesis through Numbers), which was formed from the literary strands designated as J, E, and P. In contrast, Deuteronomy, the product of a different literary source (D), is much closer in style and doctrine to the so-called Early Prophets (the books of Joshua through Kings). Moses' death notice, appended to Deuteronomy 34, enabled Deuteronomy to function as the conclusion to Moses' biography and the entire Torah.

Had the compilers of the Torah focused primarily on the people of Israel instead of the life and contribution of Moses, they might have included the Book of Joshua, which describes the conquering of the Canaanite tribes and the settling of the Land. Some early scholars suggested that a "Hexateuch" — a six-part collection — would have ended with Joshua 24. Such an ending would have recounted the journey of the people from Abraham through the exodus from Egypt, the 40 years in the desert, crossing the Jordan River, and ending with the burial of Joseph's bones, which the Israelites brought with them from Egypt. (Joshua 24:32) This ending would have symbolized the completion of the journey from Egypt and slavery into the freedom of their own land, giving us a better understanding of the essence of freedom that Erich Fromm captures in his work, *Escape from Freedom*. Once people are free from all constraint, they can join in a covenant with God, live on their land,

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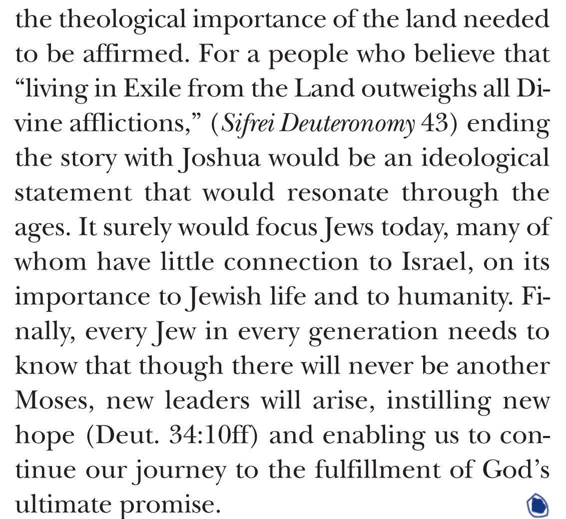
and create a society based on the values and ideals of the Torah, thus fulfilling their highest selves.

That powerful message would provide a fitting ending to the great, early historical epoch of the Jewish people — the fulfillment of God's promise to the people from the time of the patriarchs. How could the narrative end without fulfillment of the promise, with the people situated outside of the land after their 40-year trek through the desert? For contemporary Jews living in a world beset by violence, suffering, and uncertainty, such an ending to the Torah would affirm people's faith in the future and the world's potential. Furthermore, the theological importance of the land needed to be affirmed. For a people who believe that "living in Exile from the Land outweighs all Divine afflictions," (*Sifrei Deuteronomy* 43) ending the story with Joshua would be an ideological statement that would resonate through the ages. It surely would focus Jews today, many of whom have little connection to Israel, on its importance to Jewish life and to humanity. Finally, every Jew in every generation needs to know that though there will never be another Moses, new leaders will arise, instilling new hope (Deut. 34:10ff) and enabling us to continue our journey to the fulfillment of God's ultimate promise.



Endings: Two Directions at Once

Josh Rolnick

A few weeks ago, on Simhat Torah, we again finished reading the Five Books of Moses. The very last line of the Torah begins, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses …." It seems, in content, style, and tone, like a conclusion — a definitive full stop. Close the book, this story is over.

The Conservative movement's *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, though, includes the following *midrashic* observation:

"In synagogues, we complete the Torah and proceed in two directions. First we go back to the opening words of Genesis and we begin again, finding new insights on every page, not because the Torah has changed, but because we have changed since we read it a year ago. And then, in the *haftarah* for Simhat Torah, we go forward in history, to read of Joshua's leadership of the people after the death of Moses."

In many ways, I think, this perfectly distills the essence of the best endings — in fiction, nonfiction, even journalism: They should simultaneously point backward, evoking or reiterating the central theme of the narrative, as well as forward, providing a sense that, even as the story ends, in a meaningful way it also continues, as it continues working on us.

I think, for example, of the last line of Ralph Ellison's, *Invisible Man*, "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" Reading it, we come to understand it's not just Ellison's black narrator who is "invisible" to society — the theme of the book — but all of us are, each in our own way. It's a realization that can have broad implications about the way we live our lives.

One of my favorite endings takes place in Alice Munro's short story "Dimension." Set in a small town in Canada, "Dimension" is the story of Doree, a woman in an abusive relationship, whose three children are murdered by her husband, Lloyd. Doree blames herself (if only she hadn't made him so angry), and she visits him regularly in the insane asylum. When Lloyd tells Doree that he's seen the three children in another "Dimension" — and that they are doing well — Doree's pain finally ebbs. To the reader's horror, she credits Lloyd with relieving her burden.

In the last scene, Doree is on a bus heading to the asylum. The bus comes upon a horrible car accident; a man is lying, near death, in a roadside ditch. It's Doree who walks from the bus to help him, administering mouth-to-

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mouth. The man starts breathing again, faintly but unmistakably. Something in Doree shifts, and she offers to stay with him and wait for the ambulance.

"You don't have to get to London?" the bus driver asks.

The story's last sentence is one word: *No.*

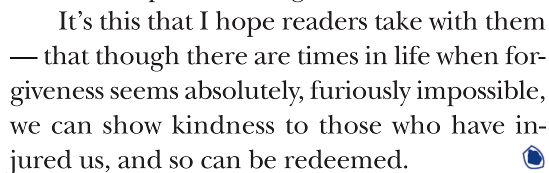
In deciding not to return to the asylum, Doree is freed from a debilitating relationship, and from her own crushing guilt. At the same time, readers understand that Munro is pushing us forward, beyond the bounds of the story, to move beyond our own torments.

I try to create a similar effect in my story, "Funnyboy," published in the *Bellingham Review* (Fall 2006). Levi Stern has a 12-year-old son, Richie, who — while riding his bike one day — was struck and killed by a car driven by local high school cheerleader Missy Jones. The police have ruled that Missy did nothing wrong. Richie shot out onto the road from behind a parked van, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. Nonetheless, Missy is heartbroken. She's apologized to Levi's wife, but for months Levi refuses to even see her; he blames her for Richie's death.

The story, told from Levi's perspective, takes place ten months after the accident, and begins: *I glanced out the window as my train pulled into the station and saw the girl who killed my son.* Over the course of the narrative, Missy persuades Levi to sit down with her at a local diner, where she tells him about a chance encounter with Richie. It becomes clear that she loved Richie, too. She gives Levi an arrow that Richie had given her, as a pick-me-up on one of the worst days of her life. Reluctantly, Levi takes it, relieving Missy of some small measure of her burden. Then, unthinking, he presses it into his palm, drawing blood. Missy asks him if he's okay. The story ends with Levi's thoughts: *I sat on a vinyl bench at Mitch's Diner across from Missy Jones, the girl who killed my son.*

The reader understands that though Levi will never be "okay" again, he has taken a first tentative step toward forgiveness.

It's this that I hope readers take with them — that though there are times in life when forgiveness seems absolutely, furiously impossible, we can show kindness to those who have injured us, and so can be redeemed.



Siyyum: Studying for Sustenance

Jane Kanarek

The Talmud teaches that whenever the sage Abaye saw a young scholar finishing a tractate, he would make a festive meal for his students (*B. Shabbat* 118b-119a). That meal was eventually designated a *seudat mitzvah*, a festive meal that marks the completion of a commandment. And the celebration marking the conclusion of studying a talmudic tractate has come to be known as a "*siyyum*," a completion. A *siyyum* traditionally consists of a study session about the tractate, the reading of the last lines of the tractate, and the recitation of two special passages: the *hadran* and the *kaddish de-ithadita*, "the kaddish of renewal." It concludes with a *seudat mitzvah.*

While it is striking that learning is an event to be marked with study, communal prayer, food, and drink, equally striking is what kind of study we usually celebrate — Talmud. We rejoice over the mastery of the central book of our oral tradition, a book that teaches us how to understand and live our written tradition, the Bible, the Tanakh.

When Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the 20th-century rabbinic authority for American Orthodox Jewry, was asked whether a meal marking the conclusion of studying a book of Tanakh could also be considered a *seudat mitzvah*, he responded that it could as long as the book was studied in depth along with authoritative commentary, and in a group setting over a significant amount of time.

Rabbi Feinstein's comments are instructive. They point us to the idea that while a *siyyum* is a celebration of reading, it is a celebration of reading "Jewishly." It is a celebration of reading in community and through the lens of our tradition. A *siyyum* marks not only the accomplishment of prolonged and in depth study, but also the engagement in the layers of commentary that make up our oral Torah. The *siyyum* teaches us that our own ideas are insufficient; we also need our interpretive tradition.

And yet as we engage the words of the past, we are bringing our current lives into the process, shaping the past through our study. This multivocal element of learning is ritualized in the *hadran* passage, which begins with the words, "*hadran alakh maskehet 'x' ve-hadrakh alan.*" "We return to you tractate 'x' and you

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return to us." However, a more accurate translation is: "Our glory on you tractate 'x' and your glory on us." The passage teaches us that as much as the Talmud has the power to glorify and beautify us, we also have the power to glorify and beautify the Talmud. This is a two-way process, where we shed light on one another. This dual conversation is essential to maintaining community and a living interpretive tradition.

Because a *siyyum* celebrates such deep engagement with our ongoing interpretive tradition, should we widen our conception of which books are appropriate to celebrate through a festive meal? Should we include the study of the *Eish Kodesh*, the teachings of the Warsaw ghetto rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira? What about the study of the book of Exodus along with Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg's *The Particulars of Rapture*? What about Mordecai Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization*?

The ritual of *siyyum* challenges us to consider which books are so central to Jewish life that we should mark their study with a *seudat mitzvah*. It asks us to open ourselves to our tradition, to realize that these words — old and new — can enrich us now. It asks us to not take studying lightly, but to realize that reading is a Jewish communal process. By telling us to learn and eat and drink together, the *siyyum* teaches us that reading our books sustains our very lives.

Jewish Visual Culture

Jeffrey Shandler

Among the texts that art historian Vivian Mann includes in her anthology *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) is a halakhic question posed to Maimonides. He was asked for his legal opinion about a man who had a *tallis* made and, "wanting to adorn himself with the commandments, had its hems embroidered with great artistry in silk," inscribing the *tallis* with a biblical verse that included God's name. "An elder of the town chastised him, saying, 'It is forbidden to wear this prayer shawl,' but the owner did not accept his word and wore the prayer shawl regularly." Maimonides replied, "This act is sinful and totally improper," explaining that it "causes verses of the Torah to be dishonored."

Mann notes how his adjudication demonstrates Maimonides' "remarkable… discernment" of different styles and uses of Hebrew script and his "firsthand knowledge of ancient Palestinian antiquities," which he references. I am more interested, however, in the man who commissioned and wore the *tallis*. We not only don't know his name; we also don't know what prompted him to have his *tallis* embellished with embroidery. We only know that he did so motivated by some personal desire (evidently an unusual decision), and that he ignored the opprobrium that his decorated *tallis* inspired. (One wonders how he might have responded to Maimonides' ruling.)

For Mann, like most other scholars of Jewish art or religion, the center of attention is halakhah, as articulated by one of its greatest scholars, concerning visual culture. But for me, this text's value is its testimony to the idiosyncratic creativity of an anonymous "ordinary" Jew, who acted not from a position of traditional erudition but from a personal impulse to enhance his religious practice through visual adornment. And it is his desire — and his decision to realize it — that compels the rabbis to debate the issue.

It has long been commonplace to charac-

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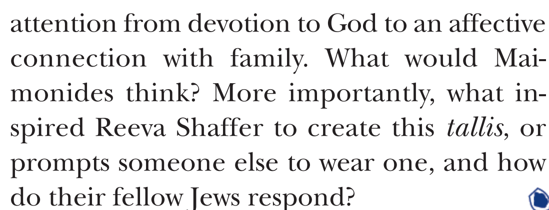
terize Jews as "textual, not visual," as aniconic (on account of the second commandment), and to deem their engagement with visual art adventitious, a hallmark of the modernist turn. I beg to differ. As Kalman Bland argues in *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton University Press, 2000), the notion of Jews as having no visual art is of relatively recent vintage and is a polemic defined by Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scrutiny of Jews as problematic figures in modern Europe. Indeed, as both Mann's and Bland's works demonstrate, the long history of visual culture as an integral part of being Jewish is readily evident to scholars of Jewish life, past and present — so much so that one has to wonder why they have, for the most part, marginalized the study of Jewish visual culture. Perhaps this is because the topic often raises prickly questions, such as why zodiacs and images of Greek gods figure prominently in the mosaic floors of some of the oldest synagogues uncovered by archeologists in the Middle East. Or, perhaps, as the rabbinic correspondence with Maimonides discussed above demonstrates, because this visual culture is largely the provenance of popular religion, originating with "ordinary" Jews' desires for decoration, iconography, materializations of the spiritual, leaving the rabbinic elite in a reactive posture and many Jewish studies scholars, who are most at home with texts, perplexed.

I'm currently studying the role of visual media in contemporary Jewish culture. In *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (NYU Press, 2009), I examine, among other topics, Jews' use of photography and video to document their lifecycle rituals. Like the *tallis* decorated at the behest of the anonymous man discussed above, these media practices exemplify the impulses of "ordinary" Jews to enhance — and, I argue, transform — their experience of religious life through visual culture. (And these practices have similarly compelled rabbis to debate their halakhic implications.) These media practices may seem very novel and, of course, are made possible by new technologies, but they are not unprecedented; they are very much within a continuum with the ancient mosaics and embroidered *tallis* of centuries past.

Indeed, the aforementioned medieval and modern practices have recently converged, in the form of a prayer shawl adorned with family photographs transferred onto fabric and stitched to the *tallis*, created by American textile artist Reeva Shaffer. On her "*l'dor vador tallis*," Shaffer inscribes the *atarah* with a sentence from Sabbath liturgy: *L'dor vador nagid gadlechah ulneytzach netzachim kedushatcha nakdish.* ("From generation to generation we will declare Your greatness and to all eternity we will sanctify Your holiness.") This richly provocative example of visual culture in American Jewish religious life validates intergenerational commitment to spirituality and shifts attention from devotion to God to an affective connection with family. What would Maimonides think? More importantly, what inspired Reeva Shaffer to create this *tallis*, or prompts someone else to wear one, and how do their fellow Jews respond?

Does Jeweish visual culture — much of which is the provenance of popular religion, originating with "ordinary" Jews' desires for decoration, iconography, materializations of the spiritual — leave the rabbinic elite in a reactive posture and Jewish studies scholars, most at home with texts, perplexed?



Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma *readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. How might Judaism be different had the Bible ended with Joshua, with Moshe and the Israelites entering the Land?

2. What do we gain, as Jews, from the "profound humility" of talmudic discourse and argumentation?

3. How might it enrich Judaism to think not as a "people of the book" but as a people engaged with a multilayered and multidimensional text?

Sh'ma שמע

Abstraction and Divine Contemplation in Jill Nathanson's Paintings

Matthew Baigell

During the last twenty years, many Jewish American artists have left behind the insistent secularism of 20th-century art and instead have sought inspiration and subject matter in the Torah. They are much less concerned with visual exegeses of the sacred text than in finding in it stories and episodes that have contemporary relevance. Paintings of, say, the relationships between Jacob and Esau and Leah and Rachel might highlight sibling rivalries and family deceptions — which are ultimately moral issues — to which the viewer can relate. But there are also artists who create visual parallels to the experience of prayer and to their readings of the sacred text. The question is: how can one transmit his/her spiritual feelings in response to such passages or to the inner life of a prayer?

If the viewer combines in his/her mind's eye Moses' exaltation on Sinai together with the belief in the creation of the world through letters and the visualization of colors through prayer and contemplation, one might be able to "see" Torah, to sense the energies coursing through the universe.

Jill Nathanson has taken the audacious step of creating abstract works with minimal narrative content. She asks the viewer with a sympathetic imagination to find in what she calls "forcefields" of color, space, and lines the visual equivalents of biblical passages in which the presence of Divinity plays a leading role. She asks the viewer to visualize Torah, not an easy, but nevertheless, an incredibly rewarding charge.

Nathanson has so far crafted two series, the first, *Seeing Sinai* (2004–2006) marked a highly experimental collaboration with Arnold Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, who wrote an extensive *midrash* on Exodus 33–34 in response to Nathanson's paintings. In her series, Nathanson intuits Moses' feelings during his second ascent of Sinai and, by extension, her own ecstatic, mystical, and spiritual responses to the idea of imagining God's presence. The second series, called *New Translations* (2008), is a sequence of six constructions based on the six days of Creation.

In the four panels of *Seeing Sinai* (three of which appear here) Nathanson imagined a way to see, to visualize, the entire episode without inventing a figurative narrative, that is, to suggest in purely abstract pictorial terms the splendor of what is for Jews the seminal moment in all Jewish history — the giving of the Torah at Sinai. She included words from Exodus 33 to key the viewer to the individual scenes but also to make the point that in one of the earliest kabbalistic texts, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, dating from the first century C.E., God is supposed to have created the world from the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Nathanson wants, in effect, to have the color and light that make up the letters to serve as the structural basis for the paintings, which, in turn, suggest that they also structure the world. This notion invokes the idea of the original Torah as white fire on black fire, an active, searing, transformative Torah rather than the Torah as a printed book.

In the first of the four Sinai panels, Nathanson sets the scene, separating the earthly from the heavenly sphere by an open, horizontal band in the center. The second and third panels suggest the vibrant emotional state of Moses as he encounters God on Sinai. And the fourth panel, bright with yellows and greens, reveals the radiance of Moses' face when he descends with the Decalogue.

The visual energy with which Nathanson imbues her canvases, intended to be the equivalent of the religious energy of the actual text, is not without kabbalistic overtones. Daniel Matt has suggested in his *The Essential Kabbalah* that one way to conceive of the *Ein Sof* (God) and His emanations is to imagine colorless water flowing into vessels of different colors, or colorless sunlight turning to colored light as it passes through stained glass windows. To say all of this differently, if the viewer combines in his/her mind's eye Moses' exaltation on Sinai together with the belief in the creation of the world through letters and the visualization of colors through prayer and

Matthew Baigell is emeritus professor of art history at Rutgers University. His recent books include American Artists, Jewish Images *(2006) and* Jewish Art in America: An Introduction *(2007). His current research interest is contemporary Jewish American religious art.*

contemplation, one might be able to "see" Torah, to envisage a religious experience by incorporating letters with the various shapes and colors, and therefore to sense the energies coursing through the universe. Abraham Joshua Heschel evoked a similar feeling when he said in *Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man,* "The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. In religious experience, it is not a thing that impresses itself on man but a spiritual presence. What is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather than the place where the act came to pass."

Nathanson's second series, *New Translations,* were conceived in a less (but still) spiritual, more physical register in that she wanted to visualize the interaction of energy, matter, and color in the creation of the universe. She found the language in Robert Alter's translation of *The Five Books of Moses* most suitable as her point of departure. For example, the very first sentence of Genesis 1, "When God began to create heaven and the earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters…," emphasizes more than in other translations a sense of strangeness, dynamism, and materiality.

Her six mixed media assemblages include colored plastic, translucent and opaque papers, and acrylic pigment. Although each image projects slightly from the wall, Nathanson's intention was to create material representations of disembodied space in keeping with her idea of visualizing the idea of creation rather than suggesting its actual physical presence. So Nathanson's "First Day" appears as a series of translucent plastic screens, dark turquoise at the left, increasingly lighter crimson toward the right, which suggests, through a jolt of pure color juxtaposition, the ultimate emergence of Divine illumination as well as the separation of forms and the development of human consciousness. Each subsequent day appears in more complex form, each unique in color and suggestion of material forces. The human being, created on day six, a powerful vertical form, aspires to and extends itself skyward to heaven.

In these two series, Nathanson encourages each individual to visualize in the combinations of colors and forms intimations of the Divine and to link one's own being to the Divine, uninhibited by the bound structures of language and prior thought. Nathanson's art asserts that the traditional Jewish value of contemplating the Divine through prayer and Torah study can give a new and exciting dimension to the liturgy in this visual age through art that is purely abstract.

"When My Glory Passes I Will Place You…" (*Sh'mot* 33:18,21)

54″x54″
acrylic on canvas
2004

"They Were Afraid to Come Close to Him (He Put a Cover Over His Face)" (*Sh'mot* 34:30, 33)

54″x54″
acrylic on canvas
2004

"And I Will Write on These Tablets" (*Sh'mot* 34:1)

54″x54″
acrylic on canvas
2004

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATHY CARVER

Interpreting Torah

Whose Torah?: A Concise Guide to Progressive Judaism, Rebecca Alpert; Introduction by Elaine Pagels; W W Norton & Co Inc, 2008, 192 pages, $23.95

For the Love of God: The Bible as an Open Book, Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Rutgers University Press, 2007, 164 pages, $22.95

Torah Queeries: Reading the Bible Through a Bent Lens, edited by David Shneer, Joshua Lesser, and Gregg Drinkwater; preface by Judith Plaskow, New York, New York University Press, 2009

Reviewed by Mara Benjamin

When the Bible enters public discourse in the United States, it usually does so in the abbreviated form of the prooftext. Prooftexts are a dense form of communication; they import a biblical verse or passage into otherwise ordinary speech and thereby immediately conjure a shared set of cultural and literary references. In just a few words, a prooftext can transform our biblical textual heritage. The effect can be breathtaking. Recall Martin Luther King Jr.'s August 28, 1963, speech: after imagining "the sons of former slaves sitting down with the sons of former slave owners at the table of brotherhood" and a world in which his children would be judged "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," King spoke the words of the prophet Isaiah: "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." The power of the prophet's words in King's speech lay in the awesome *chutzpah* of calling forth the prophet's vision and asking us to imagine that we could realize it.

But all too often, both public discourse and the Bible have been degraded when the prooftext is used as a rhetorical device. The prooftext can act as mere pious flourish; at worst, it can replace sustained thought and inquiry into the ambiguous, complex, and contradictory nature both of our world and of the biblical text. We who have survived the rapid ascent in recent decades of the Christian religious right (and the renunciation of religious discourse by the left), know all too well the dangers of a superficial encounter with the Bible. And yet we may shudder when contemplating the results of a deeper encounter with what can be a terrifying text. Perhaps, we think, the Bible is best locked up in the sober carrels of academe.

Three recent books, *For the Love of God, Torah Queeries*, and *Whose Torah?*, ask us to think again. Each offers a political, critical, and deeply personal engagement with Torah. Of the three authors, Alpert, who once proposed

Mara Benjamin is assistant professor of religion at St. Olaf College. Her first book, Rosenzweig's Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity *(Cambridge University Press), is forthcoming.*

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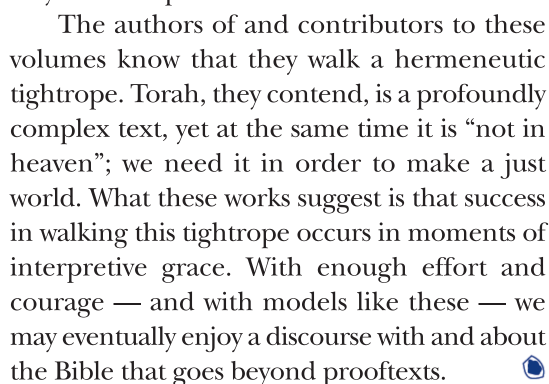
the "religious left" as an explicit counter to the religious right, focuses most explicitly on contemporary politics. She seeks to define a nuanced role for biblical and rabbinic texts in the political life of modern Jews. In this effort, Jewish textual sources appear as a set of underappreciated and valuable resources for modern political engagement. Talmudic and medieval concepts of abortion, for instance, suggest new possibilities for a "religious" take on this fraught political issue. But Alpert does not accept these sources as *prima facie* authoritative. In each case she considers, texts cannot speak for themselves; texts only speak when readers give voice and meaning to them. "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20) forms the backbone of Alpert's approach to contemporary public social and political life, but she recognizes that even this seemingly self-explanatory injunction yields a multiplicity of meanings.

Some of the most inspiring contemporary interpreters of Torah are those who return to it from a compulsion at once aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical. *For the Love of God* and *Torah Queeries* invite readers to bring precisely this unaccountable desire into the open — onto the page and into our public discourse. The diverse group of scholars and rabbis who have contributed to *Torah Queeries* ask us to bring the whole of our selves — our imaginations, bodies, and senses — to Torah. They collectively demonstrate that every *parashah* (Torah portion) can speak to us as embodied, conflicted, desiring selves and as cognitive individuals. Ostriker, uniformly elegant in word and thought, shows us a Bible that mirrors but also refracts our world and ourselves, bringing the disparate ends of ourselves together. Its texts speak to "our longing for a divinity we can love without fear" (page 31), to our inkling that eros and justice are interconnected, and to our contradictory and inexplicable selves.

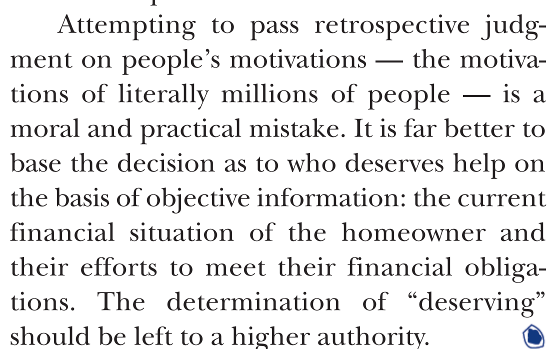


The authors of and contributors to these volumes know that they walk a hermeneutic tightrope. Torah, they contend, is a profoundly complex text, yet at the same time it is "not in heaven"; we need it in order to make a just world. What these works suggest is that success in walking this tightrope occurs in moments of interpretive grace. With enough effort and courage — and with models like these — we may eventually enjoy a discourse with and about the Bible that goes beyond prooftexts.

***Ethics** continued from page 20*

fail to fully understand their commitments and the consequences of those decisions. (Indeed, a friend with experience in the mortgage business comments that lenders themselves often did not understand the loans they were making, but that is a different matter.) This is especially true for some of the new types of mortgage instruments that developed in recent years. One of the most common such subprime mortgages is the "2/28" — a 30-year loan with a very low interest rate for the first two years, which then adjusts according to rates in the prevailing mortgage market. These adjustments can be steep. A young man of my acquaintance bought a condo with such a mortgage: for the first two years, his mortgage rate was three percent; then it suddenly rose to nine and a half percent, and since then it has changed every month. The market rate over these years has been about six percent. He attempted to refinance into a market-rate loan, but the lender would not let him do so until he had paid the nine and a half percent rate for at least one year.

It can be argued that the young man got a "deal" for two years and has no real grounds for complaint: three percent for two years and nine and a half percent for one year is cheaper than six percent for three years. But the lender never explained the loan to the young man, and he didn't know how to read the loan documents or what questions to ask. Such actions by a lender can be considered one type of predatory lending: if the lender does not fully explain the loan, the borrower cannot make an informed decision. Is this young man "deserving"? To my mind, yes; others may simply feel he should have known better. How does a federal government program decide the question?



Attempting to pass retrospective judgment on people's motivations — the motivations of literally millions of people — is a moral and practical mistake. It is far better to base the decision as to who deserves help on the basis of objective information: the current financial situation of the homeowner and their efforts to meet their financial obligations. The determination of "deserving" should be left to a higher authority.

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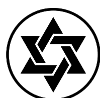

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Sh'ma שמע

Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of homelessness. Each month an esteemed guest columnist wrestles with what Jewish texts and our interpretive tradition teach us about the parameters, and limits, of Jewish responsibility to those without shelter. The column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series of columns with responses, as well as a series of paintings by artist Pat Berger on the homeless of Los Angeles.

The Housing Crisis:
Who Should Be Helped?

John C. Weicher

John C. Weicher is director of the Center for Housing and Financial Markets at Hudson Institute. During 2001–2005 he was assistant secretary for Housing and Federal Housing Commissioner at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The crisis in American housing and financial markets started in February 2007 when a number of large mortgage lenders began reporting unexpectedly large losses on their portfolios of subprime mortgages, or securities backed by subprime mortgages. In human terms, this means that families were, and still are, unable to make the monthly payments on these mortgages. As they defaulted, the lenders foreclosed, and the families lost their homes. Since August 2007, the federal government has been working with private lenders to help these families stay in their homes in two ways: first, to enable homeowners to refinance their subprime loan into a mortgage insured by the Federal Housing Administration that carries more favorable terms; and second, to encourage lenders to engage in "loss mitigation" — modifying the payments on the mortgage for a period of time, or modifying the loan itself so that the homeowner owes a smaller amount or has a lower interest rate.

A common theme in these efforts and in other proposals and public discussion generally, has been to make sure that only the "deserving" are receiving help. There is an effort to distinguish the family that is trying to make its mortgage payment but has run into problems beyond its control — a decline in property values, loss of a job, or illness — from the family that never had any particular intention of making payments on the mortgage. This draws on a distinction in social welfare policy between the "deserving poor" and the "undeserving poor," reinforced by the concern of families who are paying both their taxes and their mortgages that their taxes should not go to help people who are not trying to help themselves and should never have bought a home in the first place.

This effort to identify the deserving is futile and counterproductive, for two reasons. First and more fundamentally, we do not know the intentions of these families; we cannot know what they were thinking when they bought the house two or three years earlier. As private citizens, we may be able to offer an informed judgment about the motivation of people we know well, but the government cannot and should not make these judgments; both arbitrary rules and discretionary decisions can be too easily abused. Consider a lower-income family hoping to buy a home for the first time: the terms of the transaction may indicate, especially after the fact, that the family may not to be able to make the payments over the duration of the loan; but the family itself may have relatives or friends who bought homes under similar terms a year or two earlier and the brother-in-law or the coworker is doing fine and the value of the home is rising. Is this family's decision to buy a home, with a subprime mortgage, motivated by a desire to improve its economic position, or by greed — by good or bad intentions? Who can know?

This hypothetical example leads to the second reason. The process of buying a home, and still more the process of taking out a mortgage, is very complicated, and often bewildering to first-time buyers. People often

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